



Dear Congressman Oberstar and Colleagues:

I write in support of HR 5316 and your efforts to reestablish the Federal Emergency Management Agency as a cabinet-level independent agency reporting directly to the President.

Restoring FEMA's independence will not create confusion and turf battles among the agencies responding to a terrorist attack as some opponents claim. Rather, it will begin to rebuild our nation's emergency management infrastructure and ensure effective responses to natural disasters. The Oklahoma City bombing was the first presidentially declared disaster that was also a crime scene, and required FEMA, FBI, ATF, U.S. Marshal, and local police and fire units to work together. It was difficult at first, but certainly not impossible, and ultimately we were all working toward a common purpose—to respond to the devastation, recover the victims and help restore the community. This was again the case when FEMA was involved in the response to the events of 9/11 at both the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Turf battles have not been absent since the creation of DHS. Turf battles are bureaucratic struggles about funding and program oversight and rarely take place during an incident response. They have certainly continued within DHS, and FEMA has not had much influence in these bureaucratic struggles. Currently, the Administration and the DHS Secretary have complete discretion to reprioritize funding and move programs—which they have done—and which resulted in the disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina and in other disaster programs.

Though there's a general consensus that FEMA must be mended, we don't have the luxury of trying yet another experimental restructuring of the department. The best way to “fix” FEMA is to recreate the agency that wasn't broken.

In the 1990s, FEMA was an effective, highly respected agency that knew and followed its mission to provide leadership and support to reduce the loss of life and property through a comprehensive, risk-based, all-hazards program of mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. FEMA was recognized as a model of good government by many think tanks and policy experts including Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and the Council for Excellence in Government.

In the case of events that are clearly not of terrorist origin, such as Hurricane Katrina, an independent FEMA could respond immediately, as in hurricanes past, without waiting for approval or instructions to flow down through layers of bureaucracy.

Right now, the future of FEMA and every American who will feel the effects of a natural disaster hangs in the balance. Right now, as we begin to ride out what is predicted to be a highly active hurricane season, we have the opportunity to right a wrong by making FEMA strong and independent---not a shadow of its former self.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "James Lee Witt". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and "W".

James Lee Witt